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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ALGIERS 000252

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [AG](#)  
SUBJECT: FOR THE DISENCHANTED, A FACEBOOK PRESIDENT

REF: A. ALGIERS 226  
[1](#)B. 08 ALGIERS 1194  
[1](#)C. 08 ALGIERS 1208  
[1](#)D. 08 ALGIERS 1279

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Frustrated by the lack of political space in Algeria's real society, some young Algerians are going online, creating an informal political party and engaging on Facebook with someone they believe to be President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Bouteflika's campaign workers tell us "Facebook Boutef" is not connected to the real president in any way, as Bouteflika is a man who neither uses nor understands the internet and believes the best way to connect with the population is through old-fashioned handshaking and baby-kissing. Yet the volume and tone of those seeking counsel from Facebook Boutef reveal a deep thirst for a connection to Algerian leadership that simply does not exist, and a desire to participate despite a profound apathy regarding the April 9 presidential elections. Until now, Algerian government presence on internet social networking sites has been limited to monitoring and occasional intimidation of those promoting views antithetical to Bouteflika's agenda, particularly his trademark reconciliation and integration policy for repentant terrorists. However, Bouteflika's presidential campaign apparatus has taken note, and is scrambling to launch an official web and Facebook presence that already appears heavily inspired by Barack Obama's successful use of the medium to engage young voters. END SUMMARY.

TURNOUT: THE DEEPEST FEAR  
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[1](#)2. (C) Low voter turnout is the biggest concern of a regime that realizes most Algerians believe the April 9 presidential election has already been rigged in favor of a Bouteflika re-election (ref A). As political consultant Mounir Guerbi told us recently, "April 9 is insignificant; November 12 was the date the election was decided," referring to the date Algeria's parliament ratified the revision of the constitution that, among other things, eliminated term limits (refs B, C). Guerbi, a well-connected advisor to both Bouteflika's current campaign and to the 2004 presidential campaign of retired General Rachid Benyelles, said the key political negotiations within the leadership had already taken place by that time, and between November and April there was nothing left to discuss. The biggest challenge, as political cartoonist Ali Dilem has illustrated and told us since November 12, became how to find enough "hares" -- candidates to give Bouteflika some token competition -- and how to inspire high enough voter turnout to give the election credibility. Political consultant Arslan Chikhaoui recently

told us that based on his conversations with regime officials, the leadership was privately nervous about a high level of perceived voter apathy jeopardizing its efforts to manage the election and "had not given this variable enough thought" in advance.

"DEAR MR. PRESIDENT"

13. (C) It is difficult to gauge the number of Algerians present online, though reliable estimates of internet penetration in mid-2008 ranged from seven to fifteen percent.

According to Amara Benyounes, a former minister and opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) figure now working on Bouteflika's reelection campaign, those numbers have been increasing sharply. In appointing new Minister of Telecommunications Hamid Bessalah last year (ref D), Bouteflika demanded an aggressive campaign to increase internet penetration throughout the country. In spite of that, Benyounes told us, Bouteflika himself is "not cooperative" with their efforts to use the internet for outreach and rock-the-vote initiatives. "When we talk to him about it," Benyounes said, "he just does not get it," and neither uses the internet himself nor understands its power. Benyounes said that Bouteflika sees himself as a man of the people in the traditional sense, and as such believes his campaign should consist of traveling around the country, shaking hands, setting up photo opportunities and kissing babies. Given "our concerns about voter turnout," Benyounes said, the campaign was going online in spite of Bouteflika, although he said Bouteflika was aware and impressed "in a

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general sense" by President Obama's successful use of the internet during his campaign. Benyounes said the campaign contracted to bring in "two young guys" from France to run its website ([www.bouteflika2009.com](http://www.bouteflika2009.com)), a domain the campaign had to purchase from "someone in Canada." In addition, Benyounes said these two "web campaign managers" would launch a Facebook campaign as well following the official March 19 start of the campaign.

14. (C) Meanwhile, an Abdelaziz Bouteflika already exists on Facebook and has more than 420 friends. Only a degree of subtle criticism in "Facebook Boutef's" photo albums suggests that this is not actually the real president. But whether they believe it is Bouteflika or simply want to believe, the friends of the virtual president have come to him seeking advice, bringing greetings on holidays and giving their opinions whether or not he should run for a third term. As Kamel Amarni, Secretary General of the National Syndicate of Journalists, told us recently, the internet represents "the last bastion of free expression in Algeria," given the pressures and limitations placed on journalists. In Amarni's view, it is natural for Algerians to go online seeking to interact with their president, since "everyone in the world wants to feel connected to their government" and there is simply no other way to do so in Algeria today.

15. (C) "Dear Mr. President," wrote a middle-aged single mother earlier this year who needed help navigating Algeria's awe-inspiring bureaucracy, "I am here to support you as I did for your first and second terms. But I need your help - I filed my request for government housing a long time ago and have no idea when I will get a response. Can you help my son and me move into affordable housing?" One 29-year-old university graduate in computer science named Idir wrote in asking the president how to obtain his "rights" and get a decent job without paying bribes, since all good jobs seemed to go to people from well-connected families. Construction workers have weighed in to thank Bouteflika for raising the minimum wage, authors ask for help in protecting their intellectual property rights, and still others ask Bouteflika whether the advent of call centers in Algeria will have a positive effect on the job market. In almost every case, the Facebook President responds, addressing each constituent as

"mouatine" (citizen) and often telling them not to abandon hope, sometimes providing a point of clarification on Algerian law.

"THIS IS THE GOVERNMENT"

16. (C) By contrast, the actual Algerian government is "wary and confused" by the internet, according to Sofiane Benyounes (a distant cousin of Amara Benyounes), who runs a Facebook group bitterly opposed to Bouteflika's program of national reconciliation. Sofiane told us that the government did not know what to do with the Facebook President, since it saw some value in the phenomenon but was concerned that it could not control it. Because of this, Sofiane said the Algerian embassy in Washington contacted the management of Facebook and asked it to warn Facebook Boutef to "tone it down." For a brief time in January, the virtual president disappeared, only to reappear several days later. Meanwhile, Sofiane's group boasted 3,666 members as of March 11, including the family members of well-known "eradicateurs" (the "eradicators," those who favor an uncompromising approach to terrorism), such as retired generals Khaled Nezzar and Larbi Belkheir. According to Sofiane, the Algerian government regularly monitors social networking sites, occasionally making its presence known. He told us of several examples in which mysterious avatars would pop up on his site, announcing "this is the government" and making it clear that his facebook group was being watched. Sofiane shrugged, saying his anti-reconciliation views were well known, and he had always assumed he was being monitored, since "virtual reality reflects actual reality."

FREEDOM OF (VIRTUAL) ASSOCIATION

17. (C) Political consultant Mounir Guerbi pointed out that since Algeria's state of emergency has severely restricted freedom of association since 1992, the internet is the only place left where Algerians can congregate freely. Indeed, the opposition Algerian Facebook Party (PAF), which had 582 members as of March 11, is organized meticulously after Algeria's actual parties, even to the extent of having a

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shadow minister for each cabinet portfolio. PAF Secretary General Djamel Irbah organized PAF's first party conference online on February 27 from 2000-2200 local time, during which 174 PAF ministers and delegates discussed the party platform and whether their dissatisfaction with the presidential elections was best expressed through participation or boycott. The party conference also decided to publish an e-magazine aimed at Algerian youth. While numbers are hard to define, one Facebook group attempting to take a census of Algerians online had 18,558 members as of March 11, suggesting the online Algerian community numbers tens of thousands at least.

COMMENT

18. (C) Whether or not webgoing Algerians realize that Facebook Boutef is not their real president is not as important as the thirst the phenomenon represents: faced with a distant and impersonal government, they want to believe. The flurry of online political expression since the November 12 revision of the constitution has ranged from blatant opposition to fervent support for Bouteflika, and everything in between. As our contacts have made clear, this level of activity has the government stumbling to catch up online -- nervous at not being able to control virtual freedom of association, while at the same time actively promoting increased internet penetration throughout the country. As Amara Benyounes told us, Bouteflika's campaign is going online for the first time in spite of the president, not because of him. Benyounes believes that online politics

offer great hope for the integration of Algeria's alienated youth into the political system. This hope, along with the absence of any viable alternatives, led Benyounes from opposition and into Bouteflika's camp. As Bahia, a student, wrote to her virtual president, "you are our only choice, Mr. President," against a sea of socio-economic and political troubles. Notably, the virtual president replied and thanked Bahia for her support, a gesture not lost on thousands of young voting-age Algerians.

DAUGHTON